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SUBJECT: MENNONITES HOLD FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN HCMC

REF: A) HCMC 967 B) HCMC 917 AND PREVIOUS C)HCMC 651

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**¶1.** Summary (SBU) On November 15, the Vietnam Mennonite Church (VMC) became the latest Protestant denomination to celebrate their first General Assembly since achieving national-level registration in September 2007. Mennonite leaders from around the world, including the United States, attended the official opening ceremonies together with an array of GVN officials from HCMC, Hanoi and the provinces. In the historical overview provided to attendees, the VMC made note of difficulties overcome after 1975, as well as divisions formed between Mennonite sects in 2004 over the issue of whether to proceed with national registration. The Mennonites are the third congregation to hold a General Assembly in the last two months, marking continued progress on the registration and recognition of Protestants in Vietnam (ref A and B). End summary.

**¶2.** (U) In a ceremony filled with lively musical performances and shared goodwill among GVN officials, Mennonite leaders and pastors from several other Protestant faiths, the Vietnam Mennonite Church (VMC) kicked off their first General Assembly in HCMC on November 15. The group of over 200 participants included pastors, evangelists and followers from 24 different provinces. After several rousing hymns and dance performances by youth groups, VMC President, Reverend Nguyen Quang Trung, thanked GVN officials for their support in helping the VMC achieve national-level registration. Large floral wreaths from the Ministry of Public Security (MPS), several Protestant congregations and Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA) offices in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and the provinces attested to the widespread official support the VMC has achieved. GVN guests included Deputy Director Nguyen Thanh Xuan from the National CRA, HCMC CRA Director Huynh Ngoc Thanh and an array of officials from city, district and provincial offices. Mennonite representatives from Zimbabwe, Cuba, Japan, Indonesia, Switzerland, Canada and the U.S. were also present.

**¶3.** (SBU) CRA Deputy Director Xuan congratulated the VMC, noting that the "new era of reform" in Vietnam has created a more supportive environment for religious groups in Vietnam, and that the Prime Minister has recognized the need for spiritual support and guidance that Protestant groups have brought to their followers. He praised the strong Protestant values that have contributing to the positive growth of Vietnamese society, including charity, diligence and humanitarianism. Xuan concluded his speech by quoting from Corinthians 1:13, which emphasizes love as the most important expression of faith and service. U.S. Mennonite leaders, several of whom had been missionaries in Vietnam during the war, welcomed their Vietnamese brethren back to the international community of Mennonites and looked forward to greater cooperation and exchanges with the VMC as the organization carried out its global mission.

51 Years In Vietnam

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¶4. (SBU) Church leaders were quick to point out that the General Assembly was actually the second held in Vietnam since the VMC was founded 51 years ago, albeit the first since the group achieved national registration. The Eastern Mennonite Mission first came to Vietnam and established the Vietnam Mennonite Church (VMC) in 1957. From 1957 to 1975, VMC acquired in properties in HCMC and Can Tho for offices, churches, training centers and schools. After 1975, many VMC pastors left Vietnam and in 1978, the GVN took over all the church's properties. All religious activities went underground. In 1983, Reverend Trung and his fellow pastors began rebuilding the church's membership and re-establishing meeting points. With the help of the Eastern Mennonite Mission, the VMC opened bible and theological training classes in HCMC and Quang Ngai from 1999 to 2004. They also began carrying out charity work again, including carrying out flood relief in the Mekong Delta and funding corrective eye operations in Quang Ngai.

VMC Division Over Decision to Register

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¶5. (SBU) The Mennonites went through an internal schism in 2004 when three congregations broke from the VMC over the issue of whether to pursue official registration and recognition under the GVN's legal framework on religion. The congregations, one of which was led by Reverend Nguyen Hong Quang, the VMC's Vice President and General Secretary, were opposed to proceeding with registration because the organization had already received legal status in 1964. At that time, Reverend Quang's congregation also wanted to wait until he had been released from prison (he was arrested for disturbing the peace and resisting arrest in 2004). Reverend Quang, a long-time political activist, colleague of Dr. Nguyen Dan Que and signatory to the Bloc 8406 manifesto, continues to lead his own separate Mennonite congregation in HCMC. Reverend Nguyen Cong Chinh of the Central

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Highlands province Gia Lai was also formerly affiliated with Quang's Mennonite sect, but has since formed his own umbrella Protestant group, the Vietnamese People's Evangelical Fellowship (VPEF), which claims to represent over 60 different Protestant congregations and all 54 ethnic minority groups (ref C). The rest of the congregations, led by VMC President Trung, proceeded to register under the legal framework on religion.

¶6. (SBU) As of Sep 1, 2008, the VMC now have 90 congregations (with 26 registered, 30 processing registrations and 34 pending registrations), four chapels, 138 clergy and 6,123 followers. 3,923 followers are ethnic minorities, including members of the Bahnar, Stieng, Kor, H're, and Jarai minority groups. Binh Phuoc province has the largest number of congregations (22) and followers (1,340). The VMC opened a theological training center and launched the first theological courses in early 2006, providing training for new and current pastors and evangelists.

¶7. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Hanoi.  
FAIRFAX